



KIAMA ANGLICAN
CHURCHES

Better Than A Sure Bet

Genesis 14

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Return to Beth-El

At the beginning of Genesis 13, we see that Abram is travelling again. He's now left Egypt after his notorious "massaging of the truth" we heard about last week and, as he's left he's brought his nephew, Lot, and all the peace offerings from Pharaoh. It's a kind of foreshadowing of the Exodus of Israel under Moses, where the same thing will happen:

Ex. 12:33 [After the curse of the Passover] The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" ³⁴ So... ³⁵ The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians... ³⁶ ...and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians.

You see it's the same story again as what we read last week. Because of the curse of God, the Egyptians sent Abram, and later the Israelites, out of Egypt, loaded up with wealth.

And so Abram, Lot and their clans travel up into the Negev desert, and Genesis 13:3 says they travelled on to Beth-El.

Of course, it wasn't Beth-El yet; that name is what's called an "anachronym"—a name out of time. According to Genesis 28, it was Jacob (Abraham's grandson) who named it Beth-El, *House of God*, after he had a vision (in the night) of angels coming and going out of heaven in that place.

But it was already special. Because before sojourning in Egypt, Abram had dwelt there before. In Genesis 12:8, *before* he went to Egypt, Abram came to Beth-El, built an altar, and called upon the name of the Lord—be'shem Yahweh. In 13:4—after his time in Egypt—he's now returned. And he either rebuilds or returns to his altar (as was his practice), and at that site he calls again upon the name of Yahweh, The Lord.

That's interesting, by the way, because in Exodus 6:3 God says to Moses, *"I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name (Yahweh) I was not known to them."*

Here in Genesis it states quite clearly that Abram calls on the name of Yahweh, but perhaps there's a sense in which he isn't *fully* known until he is revealed to Moses as...

[Exo. 34:6-7] "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet not leaving the guilty unpunished."

But either way, here in Beth-El the text of Genesis is quite clear; Abram calls upon the name of the Lord.

This is a really interesting place in the hills of Palestine, twelve Roman miles north of Jerusalem. Before the temple in Jerusalem, it was one of the most significant religious sites in the ancient Jewish religion. It bookends Abram's time in Egypt; it's where he spoke with God and where God reaffirmed his promises to Abram. It's where Jacob flees from Esau and has his vision of the heavens opened, and, perhaps most importantly, it's one of the ways Jesus refers to himself. In John 1:51 Jesus says that *"Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."* It's a reference back to Jacob's vision and it means that that sense of 'a holy place where heaven touches earth' is fulfilled in Jesus; but it began at Beth-El.

And yet not all is well in Beth-El.

More money, more problems

It was the notorious B.I.G. who famously rapped "more money, more problems" and sure enough, wealth brings drama to this story. While Lot and Abram travelled from the Land of Ur together, to Harran, then to Canaan, then to Egypt and back—these inseparable kinsmen (uncle and nephew - as close as he had to a son) are now pitched against each other because of wealth:

^{13:5} Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶ But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. ⁷ And quarrelling arose between Abram's herdsmen and Lot's.

You see they've got big herds and they're living in land which is beautiful, but not abundantly producing hay; so there's squabbles. "I need that water!" "No, that's our water - we were here first."

So Abram calls a truce and says, "You know what? Let's not do this. We have the whole of Canaan, which bit do you want?" You know he's latched onto that promise of God: *all this will be yours*, and says OK, well, why are we fighting over tidbits then? Tell me which bit you want and you can have it.

It's an act of faith and grace for Abram. You wonder if he learned something coming out of Egypt? If he wasn't trusting God, I don't think he'd see it this way. And to let his nephew choose first is pretty kind. I mean, the promise was to Abram - not to Lot. So if it's anyone's right to choose which part of Canaan they want, it's Abram's. But he gives the choice to Lot.

The little blighter

So how does Lot choose? Well...the greedy little blighter picks the best land for himself without a second thought. Verse 10: Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan towards Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt (with its rich alluvial floodplains of the Nile). And he says, "I'll have that whole bit, where it's all lush."

And Abram goes, "...OK" and lives among the hills of Canaan.

It's an interesting moment because while Abram shows faith and grace, Lot sees what seems a sure bet and he jumps on it. And I think this is where we kind of 'make hay' with this passage.

Because it's easy to do that in life, isn't it? It's easy to do exactly what Lot did. We see an opportunity for gain...we see a sure bet...and we jump on it. You know it might be property investment, or cryptocurrency, job opportunities or investments. And sometimes we can be a little *too much* like Lot and kind of 'push past' other people or commitments; we get eyes full of green and go a little crazy.

But the warning here comes in verse 12-13. From verse 11 it says,

Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan (river) and set out towards the east. The two men parted company: ¹² Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. ¹³ Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

See why did Lot go there? It's green! And maybe he could make some green for himself. It looked *great!* Like the Garden of Eden itself; like all the beauty of the Nile floodplains in growing season. That's what he sees. As far as we can tell, that's *all* he sees. But what does the writer want *us* to see?

Verse 13: The people of Sodom were wicked and sinning greatly against the Lord

Now if you haven't been around church, you may not know this, but Sodom and its sister city Gomorrah have a fairly notorious reputation in the pages of the Bible. In Ezekiel 16:48-50 we're told that the sin of Sodom was arrogance, self-indulgence, lack of care; they were mean and proud and wicked. Later in Genesis 19 we see that it's characterised by a kind of sexual predation that'll turn your stomach; and we might 'trigger warning' that because it's harrowing. Sodom's 'anti-hospitality' is famous and dangerous, to visitors and ultimately to their own souls.

Lot doesn't see it.

Lot doesn't see it, but the author flags it for us. Lot's short-sighted "sure bet" turns out *real bad*, even if it looks like Abram's the one who has to kick rocks in the high country.

You know there's a real risk that in chasing our profit and gain we hurt others, miss details, fall blinded by greed, and ultimately pay a steep price. There are plenty of people who bought into bitcoin in the last month and have lost between 20 and 50%, but that's peanuts compared to the loss of a soul - something Jesus warns is a real possibility in our hunger for wealth.

You see there's a lesson here, just a foretaste, when we notice why Lot chose the plains for his own. And when we see what he missed in his lust.

What's better than a sure bet?

So what's better than a sure bet? Has Abram missed out? **No.** No he hasn't, because God's promise is better than Lot's eyesight (which, as we know, is actually very badly blinkered). Because Lot chose "the best", but it wasn't, and he'll pay the cost... meanwhile Abram has the most valuable thing - the promise of God.

It's almost as though we can see Abram standing around on the heights of Beth-El with his herds, watching Lot go down to the verdant plains and looking back to where Abram will live, eyeing tussocks and tufts. And as you picture the old man sighing, leaning on his knurled walking staff...in that moment, we hear the voice of God come to Abram.

Verse 14, God says: Look from 'round where you are, to the north and the south, to the east and the west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring for ever. ¹⁶ I will make them like the dust of the earth, that if you'd count the dust, you could tally them up. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, because I am giving it to you.

Everything you can see! Even that far-off floodplain your nephew is so pleased with; you haven't lost any of it, because you still have my promise.

So what's better than a sure bet? The promise of God.

So what does it all mean for us?

If you're living, there's times you've missed out. I said before that if you'd invested in cryptocurrency in the last month you would've lost 20-50%. And that's true. But it's also true that if you'd invested in January, you'd still be up around 600%. And if you're like me, you hear that and part of you goes, "man, if only". It happens with money, relationships, jobs, how we spend our time... It's been said that *'to live is to regret'*.

We find ourselves standing there next to Abram, on the heights of Beth-El, watching Lot prance off into the distance looking like a

cross between the Monopoly Man and the cat that got the cream. And we feel that regret and that sense of... *Why...?* What was the point of being patient, and faithful, and gracious...? Or cautious and doing our best...?

But it's in that moment where the voice of God will minister to us, if we listen. So what does he say to us?

Well if you're here and you're Christian, he reminds you of his promise. I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper, not to harm. I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth. As I live, Jesus says, so too will you. And I will prepare a place for you—where there is no mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

If you are in Christ, you haven't missed out on a *thing*; you just need to remember his promises. Because there'll be times in life when the material causes you to forget the eternal and you feel that sense of "would've, could've and should've". But it's at those moments you need to listen for the voice of God, and locate your hope in him. He is the only one who can reach into Death and bring forth Life. And it's what he has done for us, if we trust in the Living One - the Lord Christ.

And if you're here and you don't follow Jesus yet:

This chapter seems mundane, but it's not. It reminds us that we can make "sure bets" in life that turn out to be anything but. So there's practical wisdom there for you, Christian or not; but there's also a spiritual wisdom.

The practical wisdom says, don't be blinkered. If you think you're on a sure thing, take the time to reflect and test whether it really is. It's too easy to be drawn in by a lust for profit and payoff, and dismiss those little concerns we could or should have. And that can spell disaster. It certainly did for Lot.

And likewise, there are times we can think that we've missed out, but we haven't. Sure, Abram had to do a little more work in the high country to find tussocks and tufts for his flock, but when fire fell from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah, the high country was the place to be. We won't always see why we ended up here and not

there, but often in time you look back and go, *Huh. I'm glad that that happened that way.*

That's the practical wisdom. But more than that, the spiritual wisdom says: God's promise is more reliable than whatever we see (or don't see). Because God kept his promise to Abram. So what is his promise to us?

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

That is the promise of God to you. And I would encourage you to bet on the promise of God.

Because it's a sure and a good promise for Mums, Dads and all of us.